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ABSTRACT

An investigation of changes in functioning of mothers and fathers following divorce is presented in this paper. Subjects were 24 white middle class boys and 24 girls and their divorced parents, from homes in which custody had been granted to the mother, and the same number of children and parents from intact homes. A multimethod approach, including interviews, observations, diary records, and personality measures, was used to assess parent characteristics, child characteristics, and family interaction. Parents and children were administered these measures at two months, one year, and two years following divorce. Results show that when a father leaves the home following divorce, the family system is in a state of disequilibrium. Disorganization and disrupted family functioning seem to peak at one year and be restabilizing by two years following the divorce. Stresses in family functioning following divorce are reflected not only in parent-child relations but in changes in life-style, emotional distress, and changes in attitudes toward the self of the divorced couple. It is suggested that these changes in the parents may be mediating factors in changes in the child's behavior. (Author/BRT)

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Beyond Father Absence: Conceptualization of Effects of Divorce

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Presented at the meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development at Denver, April, 1975.

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It may seem rather odd that the first paper on a symposium on fathers is dealing with fathers who are absent rather than present. However, I believe a fruitful way of studying the role of the father and the impact of the father on mothers and children is to examine changes in family interaction and functioning following a divorce in which the mother has been granted custody of the child.

If you examine the literature on father absence carefully you will be struck by how little we know of factors that mediate differences found between children with absent or present fathers. We tend to rely very heavily on explanations based on modeling. How can children, particularly boys, be expected to exhibit normal cognitive and social development or sex role typing or self control,

if they don't have the field independent, quantitative, problem solving, instrumental, self controlled, masculine model of the father to imitate?

Undoubtedly the lack of a male model is an important factor in the development of children however they may be less direct but equally powerful ways in which father absence effects children.

Following a divorce in which custody has been granted to the mother, the mother-child relationship may become more intense and salient. The father is infrequently present to moderate or mediate in the interaction. The mother must most of the time take over parenting roles assumed by both the mother and father in intact families, and this often imposes considerable stress on the mother. There are fewer time outs in the parenting game in one parent families.

In addition to pressures associated with lack of paternal support in child rearing following divorce, the divorced mother has other stresses to cope with. The lack of the paternal support system is also felt in economic needs, needs for intimacy and sexual gratification, restrictions in social and recreational activities and contacts with adults. How she copes with these stresses will impact on the development of the child.

It would be just as unfortunate to view the effects of father absence solely in terms of the effects of absence of a father on mothers and their related effects on children, as it is to lean too heavily on modeling as an explanation for these effects. Divorce affects the whole family system and the functioning and interactions

of the members within that system. To get a true picture of the impact of divorce, its effects on the divorced father living out of the home and on the mother and children must be examined. Because of time limitations, I am going to restrict my presentation today to a discussion of changes in functioning of mothers and fathers following divorce. I am not going to present any of our findings on changes in the behavior of children following divorce although this was a main focus of our project.

The findings I am going to report today are part of a two year longitudinal study of the impact of divorce on family functioning and the development of children. The goals of the study were first to examine the response to the family crisis of divorce, and patterns of reorganization of the family over the two-year period following divorce. It was assumed that the family system would go through a period of disorganization immediately after the divorce, followed by recovery, reorganization and eventual attainment of a new pattern of equilibrium. The second goal was to examine the characteristics of family members that contributed to variations in family processes. The third goal was to examine the effects of variations in family interaction and structure on the development of children.

The original sample was composed of 36 white, middle class boys and 36 girls and their divorced parents from homes in which custody had been granted to the mother, and the same number of children and parents from intact homes. The final sample was 24 families in each of the groups, a total of 96 families. Sample attrition was largely due to remarriage in the divorced families, to families or a parent leaving the area, and to eight families

who no longer wished to participate in the study. Families with stepparents were excluded, since one of the interests in the investigation was seeing how mothers and children functioned in father absent homes and how their functioning might be related to deviant or nondeviant behavior in children. In the analyses to be presented today, families were randomly dropped from groups to maintain equal sizes in groups.

When a reduction in sample size occurs from 144 families to 96 families one immediately becomes concerned about bias in the sample. On demographic characteristics such as age, religion, education, income, occupation, family size, and maternal employment there were no differences between subjects who dropped out or were excluded from the sample and those who remained. In addition when a family was no longer included in the study a comparative analysis was done of their interaction patterns and those of the continuing families. Some differences in these groups will be noted in the course of this presentation. In general, there were few differences in parent-child interactions in families who did or did not remain in the study. However, there were some differences in the characteristics of parents who remarried and how they viewed themselves and their lives.

The study used a multimethod, multimeasure approach to the investigation of family interaction. The measures used in the study are presented in the first table. The parents and children were administered these measures at two months, one year, and two years following divorce.

In this presentation I am going to restrict my discussion mainly to the findings based on parent interviews and the observation

TABLE 1

Parent Measures	Child Measures
Interview	Unstructured observations in the home
Unstructured observations in the home	Observations of free play with parent and child in the laboratory
Observations of free play with parent and child in the laboratory	Observations on structured task situation with parent
Observations in structured task situation with child	Observation in nursery school
Diary record	Peer nomination
Personality measures:	Teacher ratings
State-Trait Anxiety Inventory	Problem checklist
CPI Masculinity-Femininity Scale	It Test
Draw a Person	Draw a Person
Personal Adjustment Scale (Adjective Checklist)	
Socialization Scale CPI	
Rotter I-E Scale	

of the parent and child in a structured interaction situation in the laboratory, although I will occasionally refer to related findings on other measures. Therefore only these two procedures will be presented in detail.

As was found by Baumrind using some similar measures, the parent child interaction patterns in the home observations and in the free play and laboratory sessions were remarkably congruent. For example, parents who were nurturant, made high use of positive or negative sanctions, or had good control over their children tended to be so across situations. Children who were compliant, oppositional, or affiliative also tended to maintain these behaviors across situations.

Parents were interviewed separately on a structured parent interview schedule designed to assess discipline practices and the relationship with the child, support systems outside the family household system, social, emotional and heterosexual relationships, quality of the relationship with the spouse, economic stress, family disorganization, satisfaction and happiness, and attitudes toward the self. The interviews were tape recorded. Each of the categories listed in Table 2 were rated on scales by two judges. In some cases the category involved the rating of only a single 5- or 7-point scale. In others it represents a composite score of several ratings on a group of subscales. Interjudge reliabilities ranged from .69 to .95 with a mean of .82. The interviews were derived and modified from those of Baumrind, Sears, Rau, and Alpert, Becker, Martin and Hetherington, and others.

Each parent was observed separately interacting with the child in the laboratory in a half hour free play situation and in a half

TABLE 2

Control of child

Maturity demands of child

Communication with child

Nurturance of child

Permissiveness-restrictiveness with child

Negative sanctions with child

Positive sanctions with child

Reinforcement of child for sex-typed behaviors

Paternal availability

Maternal availability

Paternal face-to-face interaction with child

Maternal face-to-face interaction with child

Quality of spouse's relationship with the child

Agreement in treatment of the child

Emotional support in child rearing from spouse

Economic stress

Family disorganization

Problems in running household

Relationship with spouse

Emotional support in personal matters

Immediate support system

Social life and activities

Contact with adults

Intimate relations

Sexuality

Number of dates

Happiness and satisfaction

Competence as a parent

Competence as a male/female

Self esteem

Satisfaction with employment

Conflict preceding divorce

Tension in divorce

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hour structured situation involving puzzles, block building, bead stringing, and sorting tasks. The interaction sessions with the mother or father were on different days, separated by a period of about a month. Half of the children interacted with the mother first and half with the father first. Behavior was coded in the categories in Table 3. The coding procedure was similar to that used by Patterson and his colleagues where the observation period is divided into 30-second intervals and an average of about five behavior sequences of interactions between the subject and other family members were coded in the 30-second interval. Two raters rated all sessions. Interjudge agreement on individual responses averaged .83%.

A repeated measures analysis of variance involving test session (two months, one year, two years), sex of subject, sex of parent, and family composition (divorced versus intact) was performed for each measure on the interview and structured interaction tasks. In addition, correlational analyses of all variables within and across subgroups was performed.

What kinds of stresses are likely to be experienced by members of a divorced couple? How might these be related to parent-child relations?

Greater economic stress in divorced couples was apparent in our sample. Although the average income of the divorced families was equal to that of the intact families, the economic problems associated with maintaining two households for divorced couples led to more financial concerns and limitations in purchasing practices in divorced couples. It has been suggested by Herzog and Sudia that many of the deleterious effects of father absence on children could

TABLE 3

Interaction Coding

Parent Behavior	Child Behavior
Command (positive)	Opposition
Command (negative)	Aversive opposition
Question	Compliance
Nonverbal intrusion	Dependency
Ignore	Negative demands (whining, complaining, angry tone)
Affiliate (interact)	Aggression (tantrum, destructiveness)
Positive sanctions	Requests
Negative sanctions	Affiliate
Reasoning and explanation	Self manipulation
Encourages	Sustained play
Dependency	Ignore
Indulgence	
Opposition	
Compliance	
Encourages independence	

be eliminated if economic stability was provided for mothers with no husband in the home. However, in our study the number of significant correlations was not above chance between income or reported feelings of economic stress and parents' reported or observed interactions with their children or with behavior of the child in nursery school. It may be that in our middle class sample with an average family income of about $22,000 the range is not great enough to detect the effects of economic stress. In a lower class sample, the greater extremes of economic duress might be associated with variations in parent-child interaction or the development of the child.

A second area in which stresses are experienced by divorced couples are in social life and in meaningful, intimate interpersonal relationships. Divorced adults often complain that socializing in our culture is organized around couples and being a single adult, particularly a single woman with children, limits recreational opportunities. Both the interview findings presented in Table 4 and the diary records kept by parents indicate that social life is more restricted in divorced couples and that this effect initially is most marked for women. Divorced men go through a period of active social life one year after divorce, however by two years the social activities of divorced fathers have declined. Divorced mothers report having significantly less contact with adults than do the other parents and often commented on their sense of being locked into a child's world. This was less true of working than nonworking mothers.

Heterosexual relations play a particularly important role in the happiness and attitudes toward the self of both married and

TABLE 4

Social Life and Recreation

	Intact		Divorced	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	21.60	20.98	14.21	12.27
One Year	21.85	21.17	22.25	15.56
Two Years	21.13	21.17	16.96	16.94

divorced adults. Happiness, self esteem, and feelings of competence in heterosexual behavior increased steadily over the two year period for divorced males and females, but they are not as high even in the second year as those for married couples. It should be noted however that the subjects who later remarried and were shifted from this study of divorce and father absence to a stepparent study, scored as high on happiness although lower on self esteem and feelings of competence, as did parents in intact families. Frequency of sexual intercourse was lower for divorced parents than married couples at two months, higher at one year, and about the same frequency at two years. Divorced males particularly seemed to show a peak of sexual activity and a pattern of dating a variety of women in the first year following divorce. However the stereotyped image of the happy, swinging single life was not altogether accurate. One of our sets of interview ratings attempted to measure intimacy in relationships. Intimacy referred to love in the Sullivanian sense of valuing the welfare of the other as much as one's own, of a deep concern and willingness to make sacrifices for the other, and strong attachment and desire to be near the other person. Intimacy in relationships showed strong positive correlations with happiness, self esteem, and feelings of competence in heterosexual relations for both divorced and married men and women. Table 5 shows that in the divorced but not in the married sample if subjects were divided into those above and below the median in terms of intimacy in relationships, happiness correlated negatively with frequency of intercourse in the low intimacy group and positively in the high intimacy group. The same pattern held for self esteem. This was true for both

TABLE 5

Correlations Between Frequency of Sexual Intercourse and Happiness in High and Low Intimacy Divorced Groups

	High Intimacy		Low Intimacy	
	Male (N=24)	Female (N=24)	Male (N=24)	Female (N=24)
Two months	+.40*	+.43*	-.09 (n.s.)	-.42*
One year	+.49**	+.47**	-.41*	-.46*
Two years	+.54**	+.52**	-.48**	-.57**

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

divorced males and females. The only nonsignificant correlation was for low intimacy males immediately following divorce. Many males but few females were pleased at the increased opportunity for sexual experiences with a variety of partners immediately following divorce. However by the end of the first year both divorced men and women were expressing a want for intimacy and a lack of satisfaction in casual sexual encounters. Women expressed particularly intense feelings about frequent casual sexual encounters, often talking of feelings of desperation, overwhelming depression, and low self esteem following such exchanges.

Thus far we have been focusing mainly on changes in the divorced partners in the two years following divorce. We will now look at differences in family functioning and in parent-child interactions as measured both in the interview and in direct observations in the structured interaction situation.

One of the sets of interview scales was family disorganization, which dealt with the degree of structure in proscribed household roles, problems in coping with routine household tasks, and the regularity and scheduling of events. The fathers' scales dealt with similar problems but focused on those in his life and household. It can be seen in Table 6 that the households of the divorced mothers and fathers were always more disorganized than those of intact families, although this disorganization was most marked in the first year following divorce and had significantly decreased by the second year. Children of divorced parents were more likely to get pick-up meals at irregular times. Divorced mothers and their children were less likely to eat dinner together. Bedtimes were more erratic and the children were read to less before bedtime and

TABLE 6

Family Disorganization

	Intact		Divorced	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	15.73	13.17	23.83	20.31
One year	15.15	12.96	22.60	22.85
Two years	15.29	12.75	19.19	17.56

were more likely to arrive at nursery school late. These results were found both in interviews and in the structured parental diaries

The interaction patterns between divorced parents and children differed significantly from those in intact families on almost every variable studied in the interview, and on most of the parallel measures in the structured interaction situation. On these measures the differences were greatest during the first year and a process of re-equilibration seemed to be taking place by the end of the second year, particularly in mother-child relationships. Some of the findings for fathers must be interpreted in view of the fact that divorced fathers become increasingly less available to their children over the course of the two year period. Although at two months divorced fathers are having almost as much face-to-face interaction with their children as are fathers in intact homes who, as has been demonstrated in Biller's work, are often highly unavailable to their children, this interaction declines rapidly. At two months, about one quarter of the divorced parents even reported that fathers in their eagerness to maximize visitation rights were having more face-to-face contact with their children than they had before the divorce.

Because of time limitations the results of the parent-child interactions cannot be presented in detail. However I will try to summarize some of the more important findings as present a few tables to give the flavor of the results. In almost all of the parent-child relations data I am going to present there were significant third or fourth order interactions. The tables I will preser will be the highest level interaction for those variables. I will present mainly tables from the interview data but the findings

dealing with parallel variables from the observational data are similar.

It can be seen in Table 7 that divorced parents make fewer maturity demands of their children. Although this changes over the two years after divorce, they are demanding less self sufficient, autonomous, and mature behavior of their children than are parents in intact families. Note the curvilinear shape of the function over time which can be seen particularly for mothers.

Table 8 shows that divorced parents communicate less well with their children. That is, they are less likely to solicit the child's opinion and to use reasoning and explanation than are the parents in intact families. This effect is more marked with boys than with girls.

In Table 9 it can be seen that there is a steady decline in nurturance of divorced fathers with their children. For divorced mothers there is a marked drop by the end of the first year which we assume is a period of reorganization and a marked increase by the end of the second year as the family re-equilibrates.

On Table 10 we also see that divorced parents are less consistent than parents in intact families with the most marked decline in consistency occurring at the end of the first year and increased consistency in the second year.

Table 11 shows that the lack of consistency is reflected in the lack of control divorced parents have over their children. Again we see the increase in control following the drop in the first year. This same pattern was obtained when the percent of parental commands to which the child complied was examined in the structured interaction situation. For divorced parents its lowest point was

TABLE 7

Maturity Demands

	Intact				Divorced			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	26.6	31.4	32.8	32.2	17.8	19.9	18.4	20.0
One year	25.8	31.0	33.2	32.3	13.0	14.8	16.3	13.7
Two years	26.3	31.9	33.3	33.0	20.9	24.1	28.7	24.7

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TABLE 8

Communication

	Intact				Divorced			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	15.0	17.1	14.9	17.3	11.3	11.1	10.7	9.0
One year	15.5	17.5	15.3	18.1	11.7	9.8	9.8	11.9
Two years	15.5	18.3	16.0	18.7	12.0	15.9	8.3	12.9

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TABLE 9

Nurturance

	Intact				Divorced			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	33.1	33.4	30.3	32.8	32.0	29.5	31.5	25.7
One year	33.0	32.9	30.6	32.5	29.4	24.3	22.0	23.6
Two years	33.2	32.1	30.3	32.3	24.6	30.9	25.7	27.1

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TABLE 10

Consistency

	Intact				Divorced			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	20.1	19.7	18.4	18.3	14.3	15.8	13.0	12.7
One year	20.1	20.0	19.3	18.5	10.7	11.0	10.5	9.9
Two years	20.2	20.5	20.0	20.0	17.5	17.8	14.1	16.6

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TABLE 11

Parental Control

	Intact		Divorced	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	31.7	30.6	21.7	19.3
One Year	29.9	30.6	18.6	15.3
Two Years	30.7	30.0	24.0	23.3

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at one year with a marked increase in successful commands at two years.

Table 12 shows that the lack of control in the divorced parents seems to be associated with very different patterns of relating to the child for mothers and fathers. The divorced mother tries to control the child by being more restrictive and giving more commands which the child ignores or resists. The divorced father wants his contacts with his children to be as happy as possible. He begins by initially being extremely permissive and indulgent with his children and becoming increasingly restrictive over the two-year period, although he is never as restrictive as fathers in intact homes. The divorced mother uses more negative sanctions than the divorced father does or than parents in intact families do. However by the second year her use of negative sanctions is declining as the divorced father's is increasing. In a parallel fashion, Table 13 shows that the divorced mother's use of positive sanctions increases after the first year as the divorced father's decreases. The "every day is Christmas" behavior of the divorced father declines with time. The divorced mother decreases her futile attempts at authoritarian control and becomes more effective in dealing with her child over the two year period. Effectiveness in dealing with the child is related to support in child rearing from the spouse and agreement with the spouse in disciplining the child in both divorced and intact families. When support and agreement occurred between divorced couples the disruption in family functioning appeare to be less extreme and the re-stabilizing of family functioning occurred earlier, by the end of the first year.

When there was agreement in child rearing, a positive attitude toward the spouse, low conflict between the divorced parents, and

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TABLE 12

Negative Sanctions

	Intact				Divorced			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	15.13	10.54	17.08	14.00	8.29	18.71	10.33	20.38
One year	14.88	10.71	18.00	13.67	8.46	22.88	13.29	24.04
Two years	14.67	10.29	18.71	12.88	13.13	15.38	15.50	17.75

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TABLE 13

Positive Sanctions

	Intact		Divorced	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Two months	6.00	7.35	7.90	5.42
One year	6.04	7.29	7.63	4.42
Two years	5.96	7.23	4.88	6.08

when the father was emotionally mature as measured by the CPI socialization scale and the Personal Adjustment Scale of the Adjective Checklist, frequency of father's contact with the child was associated with more positive mother-child interactions. When there was disagreement and inconsistency in attitudes toward the child, and conflict and ill will between the divorced parent, or when the father was poorly adjusted, frequent visitation was associated with poor mother-child functioning and disruptions in the children's behavior. Emotional maturity in the mother was also found to be related to her adequacy in coping with stresses in her new single life and relations with children.

Other support systems such as that of grandparents, brothers and sisters, close friends, or a competent housekeeper also were related to the mother's effectiveness in interacting with the child in divorced but not in intact families. However they were not as salient as a continued positive relationship of the ex-husband with the family.

In summary, when a father leaves the home following divorce the family system is in a state of disequilibrium. Disorganization and disrupted family functioning seem to peak at one year and be re-stabilizing by two years following the divorce. Stresses in family functioning following divorce are reflected not only in parent-child relations but in the changes in life style, emotional distress, and changes in attitudes toward the self of the divorced couple. These changes in the parents may be mediating factors in changes in the child's behavior. A want for intimacy seems to be a pervasive desire for both males and females and the attainment of intimate relations seems to be associated with positive adjustment and coping behavior.

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Since this study only lasted two years it is impossible to state whether the re-stabilizing process in the divorced family had reached an asymptote and was largely completed at two years or whether this readjustment would continue over a longer period of time until it would ultimately more closely resemble that in intact families.